

Second Sunday after Epiphany
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

- We don't get to choose who we love.
- In High School, we read Romeo and Juliet - and I remember talking to my mom about it and I'll never forget her response:
 - Oh, that's a dumb story, she said, so stupid. They meet one day - get married the next - their parents don't like each other, so two days later they kill themselves. When they met, Romeo was supposed to be "madly in love" with some other girl. And Juliet was *thirteen*. What do they know of love? They knew each other for less than a week! What nonsense!"
- When you put it that way, it does seem rather silly.
- I wonder, then, why has this story come to be so synonymous with romance and love in our culture - so ingrained in our collective consciousness?
 - Even if we haven't seen or read the play, we all know the lines - "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?"
 - We can imagine the young girl - leaning out her balcony window - the boy lingering underneath - "but, soft! what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun."
- Oh how sweet - how romantic - these star crossed lovers.
- The idea of love portrayed in this play supports the grand myth about love that bards and storytellers have been feeding us for years.
- That love is something that just magically happens. We encounter some "soul mate," who is "the one" - and effortlessly and easily we fall madly in love- and, of course, we just knew it when we met - or, even better, at first sight - that we simply couldn't imagine a life without this person.
- And, oh, how tragic it is - if we cannot be with the person we so desperately love - because society or our family or our vows of holy matrimony tell us we can't - "we don't get to choose who we love."
- Notice the avoidance of agency here - in the way we speak about love - as being somehow passive - love is something that happens to us - we *fall* in love (as if we unintentionally tripped, or stumbled down a flight of stairs) - it strikes us from without- like an arrow through the heart (shot by some strange wing-ed angel baby, name "cupid").
- We don't often talk about love as something we actively choose - something we must work at - something we do.

- More often we talk about it as a - feeling - desire - or passion - something burning in us.
- And it is true, we don't get to choose our desires.
- If I haven't eaten all day - and I feel hungry - I don't get to choose whether or not I desire a plate of chocolate chip cookies and a tall glass of milk - so warm and gooey and delicious.
- I can't decide *not* to be hungry - to *not* want a plate of delicious cookies -
- But I'm also not a child - I can choose to not act on my desire - or choose something else.
- Since, as an adult, I also know that if I do, in fact, eat a whole plate of cookies - I'll not only, no longer be hungry, I'll feel sick, and won't want to see or smell another cookie for a long time.
- Feelings and desires come and go - passions fade - fires burn out.
- Is that what love is? A fleeting desire - a burning flame destined to cool - a sweet delight, of which we eventually grow sick?
- As someone who is planning to make marriage vows later this year, I certainly hope not!
- Like the lines from Romeo and Juliet, I suspect many of you were familiar with our second reading for today, from 1 Corinthians 13 - a passage which also seems to be ingrained in our collective consciousness - it's "the one they read at weddings."
- "Love is patient, love is kind - it does not envy - it does not boast" - you've heard it before, perhaps so many times that it even seem cliché and overdone.
- Of course, it still offers good advice for people getting married - "[Love] does not insist on its own way - it is not irritable or resentful."
- But, to be sure, when Paul wrote this beautiful ode to love in his letter to the Corinthians, he was not giving marriage advice - (he already did that much earlier in the letter, in chapter 7). Rather, he was speaking about how the Christian community should relate to one another - and more specifically - how they should respond to issues and conflicts that were creating divisions within the early church.
- In the passage just before the one we read today - that Fr. Roldan spoke about in his sermon last week - Paul likens the church to a body, with many members - hands, feet, eyes and ears - and he tells the Corinthians, "you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."
- Each of you is important - you are all very different - you have different gifts and talents - you contribute in different ways - and each of you is essential to the functioning and health of the body as a whole - "the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you" - "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it."
- Indeed - the members of the body that seem to be weaker - or less honorable - are indispensable, Paul says.

- Paul was writing to a church in conflict - he says at the beginning of the letter that he has heard reports that “there are quarrels among you” - and that the people are dividing into factions - with different members saying, “I belong to Paul” - or “I belong to Apollos” - “I belong to Peter” - and, we might imagine, I’m a Lutheran - I’m a Calvinist - I belong to the Church of England - the Episcopal Church - the Anglican Church in North America...
- Paul responds: has Christ been divided? No - there is one faith, one baptism, one body, one Lord and savior of all.
- These divisions and infighting - they grieve the heart of God - they weaken and cripple the body of Christ - hamper and impede our ability to carry out our mission in the world.
- Corinth, at the time, was an up and coming city - the new capital of the southern province of Greece (known as Achaea) - a growing commercial center located at a key shipping lane - connecting the Aegean sea with the Western Mediterranean.
- The membership of the church reflected the population of this metropolitan area - a diverse mix of social classes and different ethnic groups - “Jews and Greeks, slaves and free” - some were highly educated - and some were unskilled laborers.
- People perceived as rich, or powerful, or wise - demanded more respect in the group - thought of themselves (and were treated by others) as somehow being more important - than the poor, the weak, the uneducated or mentally challenged.
- Some were elevated and lauded over others because of their spiritual gifts or mighty works of faith: “I can speak in tongues - I have a lot of knowledge - I have unshakeable faith - I give money to the poor - I’m willing to hand over my body (to be killed as a ‘martyr’)”
- That’s all very well and good - Paul says - there is nothing wrong that - in fact, it is good for you to do these things, to have such gifts - but, first and foremost, you must have love - without love, all your gifts and deeds are for naught.
- Without love, gifted speech is but a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
- I may have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge - and I may have faith enough to move mountains - but if I do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.
- Without love, I am nothing, I gain nothing - love is what holds everything together - it is our greatest duty - and responsibility as Christians - members of Christ’s body - to love.
- This “love” is not some ephemeral feeling - a desire or longing that comes and goes - and - in having love - we are not passive agents - it is not something that just effortlessly and easily happens to us - that we simply fall into.
- Love is active - it is something we do - something we show - that we give - in our actions, our behavior, in the way we treat others, and our disposition towards them.

- The kind of love that Paul is talking about is not a mere feeling or desire - and it's not about what I want - but, precisely the opposite - it is seeking the good of the other over (and often against) the desires of the self - love that is self-giving, not self-seeking.
- To be sure, the kind of love we're talking about - is not a license for self-indulgence, and is not summed up in bland arguments for "inclusivity" or "tolerance."
- The meaning of "love" in the New Testament is far more radical than that - it is the meaning found in the story of Jesus Christ.
- As it says in 1 John, "we know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (3:16).
- This is a love that calls us to repentance, discipline, sacrifice, and transformation.
- This is a love that prays, "not my will but yours be done" - "not what I want, but what you want."
- What God wants - the "new command" that Jesus gave his disciples - is that we love one another - "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another - by this everyone will know you are my disciples - by your love for one another" (John 13:35)
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- So, in the end, it's true - "we don't get to choose who we love" - we don't get to say - "I'm going to love *this* person, but not *that* person" - "I'll be patient and kind with *these* people, but I won't put up with *those* kind of people" - We don't get to discriminate on the basis who we like or don't like at the moment - or who we think is more deserving of our love. That's not up to us - not a choice we get to make - in fact, it's not a choice at all - it's a command. What is up to us is whether or not we will obey.
 - I'm not sure how many other parents do this - but, when I was a child - and my older brother and I would get into fights - when my mom or dad found out, one of the things they would do in addressing the situation was not only make us say we're sorry - "i'm sorry" "i'm sorry" - Sometime they would make us affirm our love for each other and give each other a hug -"but he hit me, and he was mean to me, and I don't like him very much right now! why do I have to love him?"
 - "Because he's your brother." "That's not a reason!" "Yes it is - and I'm your mother, and I say so. Now do it."
- Paul refers to the church as a body - he also refers to its members as brothers and sisters - and he does not chose that term lightly - they are related to each other, as siblings, because they have all been adopted into the same family - sharing the same "Father" - whom we all collectively address as "our Father."
- We need no other reason to love one another. Because - he is your brother in Christ - or - she is your sister in Christ - is reason enough - and God is your Father, and he said so.
- In this season of partisanship, polarization and divisions, let us remember that all our knowledge, our gifted speeches, and our faith is for naught if we have not love - for, without love, we are nothing.